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## Developing Cultural Awareness in EFL Classrooms at Secondary School Level in an Iranian Educational Context

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### Abstract

An important aspect of learning any foreign language is learning its culture. However, many teachers still seem to underestimate this key component in language teaching. Consequently, the present study sought to shed some light on the place of culture in EFL classrooms at secondary-school level in an Iranian educational context in general, and the main goals of teaching culture, major means of teaching culture, the main obstacles facing teachers in teaching culture, and the cultural content of textbooks in particular. To do so, questionnaires were distributed among EFL teachers from three provinces in Western Iran, and responses from 291 teachers were then collected. The findings revealed a gap between the teachers' perceptions and practices in dealing with culture. The respondents also considered enhancing students' knowledge of culture as the main goal for incorporating cultural content in EFL classrooms. They also viewed comparing aspects of the students' own culture with those of the target culture as the commonest way of developing cultural awareness. Moreover, shortage of time was seen as the main obstacle for teaching culture. As the findings further implied, from teachers' perspectives, the textbooks have been designed with the target culture in

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**Keywords:** culture and language learning; cultural awareness; EFL teachers; integration of culture in EFL classrooms; Iran

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### 1- Introduction

Teaching a second or foreign language is more than developing in learners linguistic and communicative competence in the target language. It also involves transmitting knowledge about the target culture or the country in which the language is spoken. That is, as (Englebert, 2004, p.37) asserted, "to teach a foreign language is also to teach a foreign culture."

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From an anthropologist view, culture is defined as the way people live. The definitions anthropologists have offered for culture are also shared by scholars from other fields, including linguists. For example, (Brown, 2007, p. 380) defines culture succinctly as "the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time."

Clearly, the relationship between language and culture is a complex one. This is evident in what (Agar, 1994, p. 28) has described: "Culture is in language and language is loaded with culture." In fact, the use of a given language reflects the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken. Similarly, (Brooks, 1964) regarded language as the most advanced element of culture.

As language and culture are two inseparable entities, the incorporation of cultural issues in teaching is inevitably recommended. In contexts where there is no immediate access to the target culture, teachers and the materials being used play a significant role in supplying cultural information. In addition to teachers and realia, textbooks can also play a crucial role in supplying students with rich cultural information.

According to (Tavares and Cavalcanti, 1996), the aim of teaching culture is to heighten students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards both the target and home culture. In addition, (Kaikkonen, 2001, p.64) asserted that "the most important goal of foreign language education is to help learners grow out of the shell of their mother tongue and their own culture." (Ritlyova, 2009) contended that students improve their perception of a foreign culture and their own culture by gaining awareness of a foreign language.

However, teachers sometimes do not much address cultural issues in language classrooms due to factors like shortage of time, lack of cultural knowledge, or lack of training as to which aspects of culture to teach, among other things. Besides, in some contexts in which the target language is considered a foreign language, addressing too much cultural issues might be viewed as promoting the foreign language values and undermining the local ones.

Although a plethora of studies can be found which have dealt with some particular aspects of teaching culture, few, if any, extensive studies have addressed developing cultural awareness in an Iranian context. Therefore, this study sought, as a whole, to explore the place of culture in EFL classrooms at secondary-school level. More particularly, it takes into consideration the importance of incorporating culture in teaching, major means of developing cultural awareness, main obstacles facing teachers in teaching culture, and evaluation of textbooks with respect to cultural content from teachers' points of view.

## 2- Review of literature

Cultural awareness and developing cross-cultural awareness in teaching has been an active area of research and study in recent decades. A quick glance at related works indicates that various aspects of the topic in question have been dealt with by a great number of scholars and researchers in different contexts throughout the world. Some of the more recent studies are (Mao, 2009; Ho, 2009; Zhao, 2010; Naqeeb, 2012), and Karbinaar and Guler, 2012).

To begin with, (Mao, 2009) has examined the factors that necessitate and influence the teaching of culture in EFL classrooms to present a mode of culture teaching in China. In his view, to achieve a better understanding of the English language and also to ensure a successful cross-cultural communication in real situations, it is imperative to reconsider the importance of cultural factors in EFL classrooms and to include the teaching of culture into the teaching of English, that is, to teach culture within and beyond language.

(Ho, 2009) has studied the place of cultural content in tertiary EFL teaching in Vietnam and the effect of intercultural language learning on learners' EFL learning. To do so, he critically analyzed the underlying assumptions about culture in two traditional EFL textbook units currently used in a Vietnamese university. The cultural components of the units were then proposed through a set of standards for intercultural language learning drawn from the literature. The proposed cultural components were expected to raise learners' cultural awareness and engage them cognitively, behaviorally and affectively in culture learning.

(Zhao, 2010) article develops closely around how to foster students' cross-cultural awareness in EFL teaching. The aim of foreign culture acquisition, as he believes, should be (1) familiarizing EFL learner with the mundane situations of the English speaking countries—that is, their customs and habits, life-styles, generally-accepted worldview, etc.; (2) enabling EFL learners to comprehend the interaction between language and such social variables would affect people's way of speaking and conduct; and (3) cultivating the students' ability to objectively assess the culture of the target country. What he suggests is that textbooks writing should be approached from a

cultural view.

Naqeeb's (2012) study has provided a solid foundation for the EFL teachers by empowering them and introducing them to the essentials of developing cultural literacy in EFL classrooms. The researcher equips the EFL teachers with cultural literacy and, at the same time, sets the American Access Microscholarship Program as a model of cultural literacy promoting program in the EFL classroom. The researcher concludes his paper by recommending those in charge to adopt this new philosophy in teaching English Language as a foreign language and consider the basic prerequisites in advance.

In a more recent work, (Karbinar and Guler, 2012) mainly aimed at describing the attitudes of language teachers towards teaching culture. The researchers reported that there was no significant difference between native and non-native English speaking teachers and between the teachers working at a state or private universities in terms of overall attitude towards teaching culture. On the other hand, the higher participation rate in 'training courses on teaching culture' and 'professional development activities' was thought to result in a more positive attitude towards the integration of culture.

Having reviewed similar studies on the subject in question, the researchers now turn to state the problem and research questions in explicit terms.

### **3- Statement of the problem and Research Questions**

Foreign language education is no doubt an intercultural subject matter. Nevertheless, it was not until recent decades that teaching culture was stressed as a core component in foreign language classrooms. Today, literature on foreign language teaching is suffused with works on the place of culture and developing cultural awareness in EFL classrooms.

Although cultural awareness in EFL classrooms has been an area of extensive research and different aspects of it have been explored in different contexts throughout the world, little, if any, large-scale research has examined it in an Iranian educational context. Therefore, the present study aims at shedding some light on the overall status of teaching culture in an Iranian educational context. More specifically, the present study seeks to respond to the following main questions:

1. To what extent do EFL secondary school teachers try to incorporate cultural content into their teaching?
2. What are the major means by which they try to develop cultural awareness in EFL classrooms?
3. What are the main obstacles facing teachers in developing cultural awareness in EFL classrooms?
4. How do EFL teachers evaluate the textbooks used as the teaching material with respect to their cultural content?

### **4- Methodology**

This section consists of three subsections: participants, instrument, and procedure, each of which is given a detailed account below

#### *4-1 Participants*

The participants of this study were 291 Iranian EFL secondary-school teachers from three provinces of Ilam, Kermanshah and Kurdistan in Western Iran who were randomly selected from three largest cities of each province. Of this sample, 154 were male and 137 were female. Moreover, 147 people were from Kermanshah province, 96 people from Kurdistan province, and 48 people from Ilam province.

#### *4-2 Instrument*

In order to meet the objectives of the study, a questionnaire was designed by drawing on Byram (1997), Sercu (1998, 2005), Saluveer (2004), and Arabski and Wojtaszek (2011). The questionnaire consisted of 66 items formatted in a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 equaling the least important and 5 the utmost

important. To assess the content validity of the questionnaire, subject-matter experts were asked to review and validate. Moreover, to ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha index was estimated and it was found to be .955

The questionnaire consisted of five sections. Four sections corresponded with the four primary and secondary objectives of the study. At the end of the questionnaire there were items to collect the biodata of the respondents.

#### 4-3 Procedure

The procedure began by designing a questionnaire. As there was no existing questionnaire to match the fourfold objectives of the study, the researchers had to design one. To do so, they had to draw on and adapt other researchers who have already created questionnaires for the pursuit of their own studies. Having being revised and commented on by experts in the area, the resulting questionnaire was finalized with 66 items relevant to the subject in question.

Due to the vast geography and population of the region in which the study was to be conducted, it was decided that the participants be confined to three most populated cities of each province. Consequently, from Ilam province the cities of Ilam, Dehloran and Eyvan were selected. Kermanshah, Eslam Abad and Kangavar were selected from Kermanshah province. And for Kurdistan province, they were Sanandaj, Saghez and Marivan.

Closely related to the aforementioned point was the consideration that the questionnaires were distributed among the participants according to the population of the cities and provinces. That is to say, the larger the city, the greater the number of the participants. The whole process of distributing and collecting questionnaires lasted for three weeks, starting from mid September 2013.

The data were then input into SPSS software version 18 and analyzed by applying appropriate statistical techniques. Specifically, KS test and Friedman test were used. Moreover, descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, standard deviation of variables, degree of freedom, chi-squares, etc. were calculated.

## 5- Results

This section presents the results of the study. To begin with, the questions of the first section had to do with the place of culture in teaching. More specifically, it sought to find out to what extent teachers integrate cultural content into teaching. Table 1 and Table 2 offer the results.

Table 1 The results of Friedman test statistic for the indicators of the place of culture in teaching

Statistic	Statistic value
n	291
chi-square	34.419
df	2
Sig.	.000

Table 2 The mean ranks for the indicators of the place of culture in teaching

Elements	Mean rank	Rank
I teach cultural contents with prior preparation.	2.12	1
I consider it important to integrate cultural contents into teaching.	2.05	2
I try to a great extent to include cultural contents in teaching.	1.83	3

Another series of questions of the first section dealt with what the goal of including cultural content in teaching is. Table 3 and Table 4 present the results.

Table 3 The results of Friedman test statistic for the indicators of including cultural contents in teaching

Statistic	Statistic value
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n	291
chi-square	82.570
df	8
Sig.	.000

Table 4 The mean ranks for the indicators of including cultural contents in teaching

Element	Mean rank	Rank
Informing the learners on the target language customs and habits	5.69	1
Informing the learners on geography, history, social and political conditions of L2 country	5.31	2
Increasing students' motivation to learn the foreign language	5.24	3
Encouraging the learners to reflect over cultural differences	5.23	4
Developing the learners' tolerance and openness towards other nations and cultures	5.21	5
Informing the learners on L2 literature, music, arts	4.74	6
Developing abilities of intercultural contact	4.64	7
Encouraging the learners to understand L1 culture	4.52	8
Informing the learners on values and attitudes of L2 native speakers	4.42	9

The questions of the second section concerned the major means to which teachers resort in order to teach cultural contents. Table 5 and Table 6 give the results.

Table 5 The results of Friedman test statistic for the major means of teaching cultural contents

Statistic	Statistic value
n	291
chi-square	372.512
df	17
Sig.	.000

Table 6 The mean ranks for the major means of teaching cultural contents

Element	Mean rank	Rank
I ask my students to compare an aspect of their own culture with that aspect in the foreign culture.	11.36	1
I ask my pupils to describe an aspect of their own culture in the foreign language.	11.18	2
I tell my students why I find something fascinating or strange about the foreign culture(s).	10.73	3
I ask my students to perform role-plays in which people from different cultures meet.	10.7	4
I use videos, CD-ROMs or the Internet to illustrate an aspect of the foreign culture.	10.52	5
I ask my students to think about what it would be like to live in the foreign culture.	10.39	6
I comment on the way in which the foreign culture is represented in the classroom materials.	10.36	7
I talk to my students about my own experiences in the foreign country.	10.24	8
I talk with my students about stereotypes regarding particular cultures and countries or regarding the inhabitants of particular countries.	9.57	9
I decorate my classroom with posters illustrating particular aspects of the foreign culture.	9.51	10

I tell my students what I heard (or read) about the foreign country or culture.	9.49	11
I ask my students about their experiences in the foreign culture	9.22	12
I ask my students to independently explore an aspect of the foreign culture.	8.85	13
I ask my students to think about the image that the media promote of the foreign country.	8.63	14
I bring objects originating from the foreign culture to my classroom.	8.08	15
Other	7.7	16
I touch upon an aspect of the foreign culture regarding which I feel negatively disposed.	7.3	17
If I have the chance, I invite a person originating from the foreign country to my classroom.	7.19	18

The questions of the third section addressed the main obstacles facing teachers in teaching culture. The results are given in Table 7 and Table

8.

Table 7 The results of Friedman test statistic for the main obstacles facing teacher in teaching cultural content

Statistic	Statistic value
n	291
chi-square	190.186
df	8
Sig	.000

Table 8 The mean ranks for the main obstacles facing teachers in teaching cultural content

Elements	Mean rank	Ranks
Shortage of time	6.2	1
Lack of training in how to teach cultural contents	5.63	2
Students' lack of interest to learn cultural contents	5.36	3
Lack of educational materials	5.23	4
Educational system's desire to keep the traditional form and not to address such issues	5.19	5
Other	4.56	6
Failure to carry out programs in schools	4.43	7
Lack of motivation and laziness	4.21	8
Lack of cultural knowledge	4.19	9

The questions of the fourth section were concerned with the cultural dimension of textbooks used as teaching materials in secondary-school level. Below are the results.

Table 9 The results of Friedman test statistic for the characters in the textbooks

Statistic	Value statistic
n	291
chi-square	15.434
df	3
Sig	.000

Table 10 The mean ranks for the characters in the textbooks

Element	Mean rank	Rank
The characters in the book are representative of the foreign society with regard to their age, social class, interests, mentality, family situations, etc.	2.70	1
The characters meet foreigners or members from other nationalities living in their country and misunderstanding which might arise from these encounters are dealt with.	2.52	2

The characters' ways of behaving are linked with the society they live in.	2.39	3
Photographs show ordinary people.	2.27	4

Table 11 The results of Friedman test statistic for textbooks' expectations of learners

Statistic	Statistic value
n	291
chi-square	161.566
df	8
Sig	.000

Table 12 The mean ranks for textbook's expectations of learners

Element	Mean rank	Rank
Insights that have been given gained previously are re-used in the course of the textbook. There is progression.	5.99	1
Discussions are used to help learners gain a true understanding of a foreign culture.	5.75	2
Textbook authors hold opinions on the comprehension ability of their audience. For example, Can learners only handle data and petty facts or should they be able to compare and judge materials? Should learners be able to think in an abstract way and understand differences in value systems and mentality?	5.38	3
The cultural elements taken from the text and used in follow-up activities have been carefully selected.	5.24	4
Alternative perspectives on some aspect of the foreign culture are presented and learners are invited to choose between them and account for their choice.	4.95	5
Activities invite learners to take in a foreign perspective.	4.62	6
Questions like "What do you think about ..." are preceded by "What do you know about ....?" One first has to have essential knowledge on a foreign culture before one can give one's opinion on something.	4.45	7
The learners get the chance to reflect on their own culture.	4.34	8
Activities prepare learners to behave adequately when in contact with members from other cultures.	4.29	9

## 6- Discussion

As the findings implied, the teachers have positive attitudes towards incorporating cultural content in teaching. For example, a majority of the teachers held that they attend classrooms while already prepared to respond if any question about some aspect of the target culture is raised. This means that they read a lot and organize the relevant cultural content in advance given the students' level of proficiency.

However, one of the main objectives of this study was to seek whether or not there is a gap between teacher's perceptions and practices in teaching culture in EFL classrooms. According to the findings, this gap prevails in an Iranian educational context. On the one hand, the teachers of this study considered it important to incorporate culture into teaching. This means that they perceive culture as part of language learning experience. On the other hand, however, as it is evident from the findings, EFL teachers do not try to put it into practice as much as they verbalized it.

Regarding the purpose of incorporating culture in teaching, the results indicated that for teachers informing the learners on the target language habits and daily life is the main goal. Moreover, the teachers paid much attention to geography, history, social and political conditions of L2 country. This means that teachers seek to enhance students' knowledge of the target culture rather than skills. This is in line with Damen's (1987) view that classroom-based learning can only reflect and integrate cultural facts rather than the dynamic view of culture.

What the teachers considered as the least important goal for teaching culture was developing abilities of intercultural contact. It appears that teachers do not consider school contexts to be appropriate for practicing this critical aspect of communication. According to (Krashen, 1982), the classroom setting is not an appropriate place to acquire either language or culture. As a result, teachers prefer to address the knowledge dimension of intercultural communication most (Sercu, 2005).

Considering the major means of teaching culture, the findings revealed that comparing aspects of the students' own culture with those of the target culture is a commonest way of developing cultural awareness. As previously noted, this is very common in EFL contexts where there is no direct contact with the target country. This encourages students to discover similarities between their own and the target language culture, leading to common understanding and tolerance (Ariffin, 2006). It can be inferred that the role of L1 culture is still prominent in EFL classrooms. This is indicated by teachers' asking students to describe any aspect of their own culture in English. This means that a majority of teachers continue to believe that EFL classrooms should enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identity.

With respect to the main obstacles facing teachers in developing cultural awareness in EFL classrooms, the findings made it clear that "shortage of time" is a critical concern. It is implied that teachers complain about the number of instructional hours for teaching English as a subject in secondary-school level and request extra time. For this, they often have to disregard other aspects of language teaching, and consequently they have to stick to the content of textbooks. It's worth mentioning that the number of the instructional hours for English as a foreign language in Iran is only two hours per week. The teachers also responded that they have not been trained in how to deal with cultural content. This may entail lack of suitable strategies and clear goals that would help them create a framework for organizing instruction around cultural themes (Gonen & Saglam, 2012).

Finally, concerning the evaluation of cultural dimension of textbooks from teachers' perspective, a relatively high majority of the respondents held that "the characters in the book are representative of the foreign society with regard to their age, social class, interests, mentality, family situations, etc." This implies that the textbooks have been designed with the target culture in mind. However, Aliakbari (2005), by using a different methodology, found that the reverse is true. Using a modified version of Ramirez and Hall's model to analyze cultural content of textbooks, he concluded that the current textbooks are superficial regarding their treatment of culture. That is to say, the content of the textbooks is a reflection of the source culture rather than the target one and the values and norms of the Iranian society are reinforced in the textbooks.

## 7- Conclusion

This study sought to throw some light on the place of culture in EFL classrooms at secondary school level in an Iranian educational context. To do so, 291 EFL teachers from three provinces in Western Iran reflected their views on various aspects of teaching culture on the basis of a Likert scale. As the findings indicated, the teachers had positive attitudes towards incorporating cultural content in teaching. However, a gap was observed between what teachers believe about teaching culture and what they practice in EFL classrooms. It was also found that for teachers developing cultural awareness means enhancing students' knowledge of the target culture rather than develop skills. Further, comparing aspects of the students' own culture with those of the target culture was regarded as the commonest way of developing cultural awareness in EFL classrooms. The teachers also viewed shortage of time as the main challenge facing them in teaching culture. The findings further indicated that from teachers' perspectives the textbooks have been designed with the target culture in mind.

## 8- Implications of the study

The findings of this study can have some pedagogical implications for language planners, material developers, and pedagogues.

- a) Language planners should increase the number of instructional hours so that EFL teachers can address cultural contents as well as other associated materials.



- b) Schools should be equipped with multi-media facilities and other teaching aids to enable EFL teachers to present students with aspects of cultural content and perform other tasks such as role-plays, dramas, etc.
- c) EFL teachers should be provided with courses and workshops on how to teach cultural content.
- d) The textbooks used as the instructional materials should be revised with some aspects of the target culture in mind.
- e) Language planners should also take into consideration EFL teachers' comments and ideas about the cultural content when designing textbooks.

## 9- Limitations of the study

The scope of the present study is limited in two ways. First, the respondents of the study were all from three provinces in Western Iran who cannot be a comprehensive representative of teachers as a whole population. Second, the focus of the study was confined to the general status of culture in EFL classrooms. This means that the effect of respondents' gender, educational level, age, and provinces on the results were not taken into account. Therefore, further research studies can consider the effect of these factors as well.

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